

FORT STRONG ON ARLINGTON HEIGHTS

By

ANNE C. WEBB

During the Civil War, Fort Strong, or DeKalb as it was first called, was an important part of the system of defenses around Washington, D.C. In all there were 68 forts around Washington, 22 in what is now Arlington County. Some 18,000 men were stationed in Arlington, a community whose normal population at the time was 1,400.¹

The fort was first named for Johann Kalb, a Revolutionary War general known as "Baron deKalb."² He was born in Germany, but served for many years in the French Army and was sent on a secret mission to the British colonies by the Duc de Choiseul in 1768. With the outbreak of the war between Great Britain and its American colonies, he was engaged by Silas Deane as a major-general. His protegee, Lafayette, was also engaged to fight for the Americans. General deKalb died in the Battle of Camden in August 1780.³

Fort DeKalb was renamed Fort Strong on November 4, 1863,⁴ after Major-General George C. Strong, who had died July 30, 1863, of wounds received in an assault on Fort Wagner, Charleston harbor, S.C. General Strong was from Vermont. He had been graduated from West Point in 1857 and was only 30 when he died.⁵

With the beginning of hostilities between North and South at Fort Sumter in April of 1861, the capital city of Washington was put in a very difficult position. Virginia would undoubtedly secede, leaving the Federal City facing a hostile shore without any strong natural defenses.

Across from Washington on the western bank of the Potomac River, there was in 1861 a range of thickly wooded hills, 200-300 feet high. A short distance back from the bank of the river, they ran from near Chain Bridge to the rear of the city of Alexandria. Artillery on these heights could threaten government buildings and the highest officials of the land, so it was essential to retain the commanding position in Federal hands.

¹General background material on forts in Arlington from C.B. Rose, Jr. "Civil War Forts in Arlington," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, V.1, N.4 (1960), pp.14-27. Other general background from Ludwell Lee Montague, *Historic Arlington 1608-1932*, Arlington County Historical Commission, 1968.

²National Archives, Hq. Army of the Potomac, Washington 30 Sept. 1861, G.O. #18, S. Williams, Asst. AG.

³Dumas Malone, *Dictionary of American Biography*. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933. V.10, pp.253-54.

⁴National Archives, War Dept. AG's Office, Washington 4 Nov. 1863. G.O. #354, E.D. Townsend, Asst. AG.

⁵Mark M. Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary*, NY: David McKay Co., Inc., 1959, pp.811-12. *The National Cyclopedia of American Biography*. NY: James T. White and Co., 1907, V, p.352.

Virginia seceded on May 23, 1861. The next day, Federal troops crossed into Virginia and occupied these Arlington Heights. Before the Battle of Bull Run in July 1861, General McClellan expressed concern for protecting Washington:

Please see Barnard,* and be sure that the works toward the Chain Bridge are perfectly secure. I look upon these works . . . as of the first importance.⁶

The day before the battle, he said:

Reports numerous, from various sources, that Lee and Stuart with large forces are at Manassas, that the enemy, with one hundred and twenty thousand men, intend advancing on the forts near Arlington and Chain Bridge, with a view of attacking Washington and Baltimore.⁷

The Confederates did not press their advantage after Bull Run and advance on Washington, but it became apparent that there was to be a struggle of long duration and that the city of Washington would have to be protected in a systematic way. Federal officials realized that their defenses must be improved. Gen. Barnard, who was in charge of the defenses, described this development:

Thus from a few isolated works covering Bridges or commanding a few especially important points, was developed a connected *system* of fortification by which every prominent point, at intervals of 800 to 1,000 yards, was occupied by an inclosed field-fort, every important approach or depression of ground, unseen from the forts, swept by a battery for field guns, and the whole connected by rifle trenches which were in fact lines of infantry parapet, furnishing emplacement for two ranks of men and affording covered communications along the line, while roads were spaced wherever necessary so that troops and artillery could be moved rapidly from one point of the immense periphery to another, or under cover, from point to point along the line.⁸

Larger forts were connected in the chain by lunettes (a lunette is a field-work consisting of two faces, forming a salient angle, and two parallel flanks). The chain was completed in the latter half of 1861. The next year, a

*Brevet Major-General John Gross Barnard, in charge of the defenses of Washington during the Civil War.

⁶Hyland C. Kirk, *Heavy Arms and Light: A History of the 4th New York Heavy Artillery*. NY: C.T. Dillingham, 1908, p.66.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸John Gross Barnard, *A Report on the Defenses of Washington to the Chief of Engineers*. US Army. Washington: GSO, 1871, pp.33-34.

commission was appointed to “examine and report upon a plan of the present forts and sufficiency of the present system of defenses for the city.” They said:

To defend Washington on this side, requires simply that the enemy shall be kept at such a distance from the banks of the Potomac that he cannot shell the city. This object is accomplished by the chain of works from Fort Scott to Fort DeKalb, resting its flanks on the Potomac, the left near Four Mile Run and the right opposite Georgetown.⁹

The right flank of this chain, Fort DeKalb or Strong, was located at the northern end of Arlington Heights for the purpose of guarding the roads and approaches to the canal aquaduct bridge (near present Key Bridge, one of the supports of this bridge can still be seen near the Virginia side). The fort was three-quarters of a mile west of Fort Corcoran, on a higher crest of the heights, overlooking Spout Run. It was a lunette with stockaded gorges, i.e., an open-ended semi-circular earthworks protected by log stockades at the rear. Rifle pits were dug outside the fort, like the one that can still be seen in Spout Run Park near the W. and O.D. Railroad right-of-way. [A model of the fort as it looked during the Civil War, built by Rudolph Wendelin, is in the Arlington Historical Museum.]

The fort stood in the midst of a virgin forest, but large slashings were made in these woods to clear the ground around the fortification.¹⁰ Fort Strong had a perimeter of 318 yards and usually mounted about 15 guns—seven 24-pound guns, one 24-pound brass field howitzer, four 30-pound Parrotts, one six-pound field gun, and two 10-inch siege mortars. The fort required 141 gunners to supply five men for each heavy gun and three men for each field gun, plus three reliefs. Men required to man the fort were computed at 477, by calculating two men per yard of front and one per yard of rear parapet.¹¹ A regimental hospital was located at Fort Strong throughout the war. Within the fort a “bombproof” was constructed beginning in late 1863. The bombproof was an underground bunker to protect men and equipment from artillery fire.

A unit of Massachusetts volunteers, perhaps the 14th Massachusetts Artillery, constructed Fort Strong in August and September 1861, and manned it in 1861 and early 1862. Units of the 14th Massachusetts were also stationed at the fort from August 1862 to June 1863. Other units at the fort in 1862 included the 3rd Wisconsin Battery and Ellis’ Battery, or the 12th Battery of the New York Volunteer Artillery. In the meantime, Companies B and E of

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Henry and James Hall, *Cayuga in the Field: A Record of the 19th NY Volunteers*. Auburn, NY: 1873, p.98.

¹¹National Archives, Chart, *Defenses of Washington: Armament of Forts and Batteries South of the Potomac*, Lt. Col. B.S. Alexander, ADC Chief Engineer of Defenses. March 14, 1865. Kirk, *op. cit.*: pp.47-48.

the 4th New York Heavy Artillery garrisoned the fort beginning in April of 1862. One member of the regiment recalled his first impressions:

After a short halt at Fort Corcoran our Company B went on to Fort DeKalb, about half a mile farther, where we went into camp in a drizzling rain and sleet, our first impression on the sacred soil of Virginia being decidedly adhesive. For the next two days it rained and snowed most of the time, and our discomforts were not much lessened by being called out on guard duty. However, we soon settled down to regular drill, camp and picket routine, our hopes of being called to join our comrades on the Peninsula becoming less every day. About the end of April we received two months' pay, which with a few of us included a gold dollar, the last specie payments for years. Artillery practice was resumed here with good range and targets at 1600 yards, which we managed to break up about every practice day.¹²

The routine was arduous and dull. Inspections were frequent. On August 5, 1863, when the temperature was 99 degrees in the shade, President Lincoln inspected the Arlington forts. The same day, the regiment marched seven miles to participate in a division review, where President Lincoln was also present. The heat was so oppressive that several men were forced to fall out of the ranks. Few passes were granted to visit the city of Washington. Guard duty and artillery drill made up much of the work at Fort Strong. The 4th New York acquired a reputation as outstanding artillerists with the President and other visiting dignitaries, but while they were at Fort Strong they were not called upon to use their firing skills against the enemy.

Life at Fort Strong did have its lighter moments. The regimental historian of the 4th New York reported an "amusing" incident that occurred:

One day a man with very strong anti-Union sentiments was caught putting a villainous compound into the spring from whence the regiment obtained drinking-water. On being remonstrated with, he said he meant to poison the --- Yankees!

Another incident involved Captain Charles Morrison of Company E. He had been a militia officer, and was very rigid in his ideas of discipline, but was prone to get over-excited on occasion. Once when President Lincoln was inspecting Fort Strong, Captain Morrison was in a state of great trepidation. James L. Bailey, known as "Buck Bailey," was the member of the squad whose duty it was to pull the lanyard after the gun was sighted. Captain Morrison was so excited that, instead of giving the proper command, "Gun Squad No. 2, fire!" to the great amusement of everyone he yelled, "Buck Bailey No. 2, fire!" This became a catchphrase among the men for some time afterward. Captain Morrison was evidently quite a character. Whenever any disturbance arose in the fort, especially anything not in accord with his wishes, he would shout, "Mutiny! There's mutiny in camp!"¹³

Sometime in late 1862 the 4th New York Heavy Artillery moved its headquarters farther west to Fort Ethan Allen, near Chain Bridge, and

¹²*Ibid.*, pp.37-38.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp.38, 43, 52. National Archives, Regimental Papers of 4th NYHA

Companies B and E, which had been stationed at Fort Strong, left the area. On June 22, 1863, Company A of the 2nd New York Artillery under command of Captain William A. Berry, and Company M, under command of Captain Oscar F. Mulser, removed from Fort Cass to Fort Strong. They were joined in the Fall by Company C, under Captain William S. Rulison.¹⁴

The 2nd New York Heavy Artillery had a much more checkered career at Fort Strong than had the 4th New York. Hardly had the 2nd settled in when the commander of Company A, Captain Berry, was in trouble for being AWOL and for disobedience. The trouble was evidently cleared up, however, for Captain Berry remained in command during the unit's stay at Fort Strong.¹⁵

In early September 1863 daily details of about 40 men under a sergeant began building the bombproof at the fort. The structure was to contain troops' quarters, officers' quarters, a guardhouse and storeroom. By late January of 1864 the bombproof was still not completed. An inspector, Major F.A. Rolfe of the First Massachusetts Heavy Artillery, reported:

Fort Strong is garrisoned by three companies of the 2nd New York Heavy Artillery. The Bombproof here is not finished—the flankers leak badly—one magazine also leaks badly and much powder dust has collected upon the shelves. Officers and mens quarters for two companies complete: and cook and mess houses for the same nearly so. One of the company's quarters is very poor and must use tents. No barracks having been provided for it.¹⁶

By May of 1864 the bombproof must have been completed. A circular from division headquarters went out ordering bombproofs cleared to accept prisoners in close confinement. Fort Strong was assigned 150.

Events breaking the general monotony of life in the garrison were few. In December of 1863 Fort Strong was visited by officers of the Russian fleet. On April 6, 1864, First Sergeant William H. White of Company C was court-martialed for allowing a guard to remove charges from a gun instead of shooting them at a target, as was prescribed. He was reduced to the ranks.

Shortly thereafter all units of the 2nd and 4th New York left the Potomac defenses area to fight at Petersburg. With the end of the war, the 2nd New York returned to Arlington to be mustered out. Company M was back at Fort Strong in June of 1865, in time to turn over "all ordnance and other public property appertaining to that fort to senior officer, 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery." All guns and howitzers mounted *en barbette* were to be dismounted for transportation, and instructions were issued on turning in ammunition. The 2nd New York was mustered out on September 29, 1865, and was replaced at Fort Strong by the 3rd United States Infantry.¹⁷

¹⁴National Archives, Regimental Papers of 2nd NYHA, Reg. Order Book.

¹⁵National Archives, Regimental Papers of 2nd NYHA.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, Reg. Order Book, pt. 2.

¹⁷National Archives, Regimental Papers of 2nd NYHA.

Fort Strong was garrisoned until 1869, but with the end of the war was no longer needed as an artillery base. In March of 1869 one corporal and three privates of the 12th U.S. Infantry were stationed at the fort guarding ordnance stores. On March 20 the ordnance property was removed. The guard rejoined its regiment and the fort was abandoned.¹⁸ Remains of Fort Strong could be seen until 1959 in the grounds of an Arlington home, Altha Hall, but both were destroyed in the construction of Potomac Towers.¹⁹

Fort Strong was also once part of the Dawson farm. The Dawson-Bailey house, now part of the Dawson Terrace Recreation Center, is probably the oldest structure in Arlington County. Its exact age is unknown, but a house at that site is shown on a 1785 survey. Thomas Dawson, who lived there during the Civil War, enlarged the house in 1859. He left the place to his daughter, Bessie Lola, who married W.C. Bailey. She lived there for 94 years and died in 1955. She recalled the construction of Fort Strong and also that one of the Massachusetts officers stationed at the fort, a Major Chumasoro, had married an Arlington girl and settled here.²⁰

All that remains today of Fort Strong is a rifle trench in Spout Run Park, in the proposed right-of-way for proposed Interstate Route 66. There is also an Arlington County Historical Marker at the corner of Lee Highway and North Adams Street:

FORT STRONG

Nearby to the north stood Fort Strong, a lunette marking the north end of the Arlington Line constructed in August 1861. It had a perimeter of 318 yards and emplacement for 15 guns.

Few remnants of the Arlington forts remain. Soon a few markers may be all to show that Arlington was once a wooded ridge, fortified to protect the City of Washington from enemy attack.

¹⁸National Archives, Records of A.G.O., March 1869.

¹⁹Eleanor Lee Templeman, *Arlington Heritage*, Arlington, 1959, p.106.

²⁰Montague, *op. cit.*, p. 27. Personal knowledge of Mr. Harold McCoy.



